

Heritage Under the Ethnographic Lens

Our national record of accomplishments is impressive in highlighting our tangible cultural heritage—historic and prehistoric sites, structures, objects and landscapes. Thanks to concerned stakeholders and legislation, including the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, federal agencies along with states, local communities, and, increasingly, American Indian tribes, have been formally recognizing the culturally meaningful places that configure their landscapes. The complex process of identifying, documenting, and protecting heritage resources requires varied specialists; and cultural anthropologists, or ethnographers, are increasingly among them, joining their colleagues in archeology, architecture, history, landscape architecture, and community and tribal members as well.

Cultural anthropologists are relative newcomers to “historic preservation,” but not to “culture,” “resources,” and “community,” which are among anthropology’s defining concepts. Uniquely qualified by education, experience, and interest, anthropologists focus a fine lens on diverse peoples and concerns. As this issue of *CRM* demonstrates, anthropologists working collaboratively with local peoples identify culturally meaningful places from the traditional users’ perspectives. Places vary from once-viable but now nearly “invisible” communities and landscapes such as the African-American Fazendeville, to ceremonially important natural features at Canyon de Chelly, or culturally defined resources with traditional subsistence use in the subarctic or arctic. Even minor structures become replete with meaning once ethnography reveals their traditional value. The intimate links between cultural and natural heritages are made evident in the analysis of heirloom plants and the indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge that lends support to their propagation. Without appropriate documentation, a panoply of cultural knowledge that undergirds communities, like that of Micronesian craftspeople, is at risk. It is heartening to learn of community-based preservation

efforts, for example, by Olympic Peninsula tribes and Palauan elders and traditional historians who are documenting their own heritage. Further benefits of ethnographic scrutiny are insights into the effects of tourism on indigenous cultures, and the multiple meanings assigned to World War II memorials by visitors of different ages, nationalities, and ethnicities. Ethnography also helps us avoid being simplistic about cultural diversity by showing that people who share a common language are not culturally interchangeable. Multiplicity also becomes apparent in landscapes that ethnographically resonate with the complex values imposed by culturally different peoples.

Preservation groups and institutions, including the National Park Service, have already taken important steps in protecting vernacular rural and urban resources and actively involving people of color in heritage programs. More is needed. Greater inclusiveness would draw attention to the fuller spectrum of heritage resources that includes natural features as well as the constructed, and places of work as well as birthplaces of the famous. Inclusiveness would illuminate the sometimes hidden contributions to nation-building made by a great array of peoples. The ethnographic task in preservation is to reveal the cultural context of tangible heritage and the evidence of culture’s many intangible forms. This is likely to have a positive feedback, especially if we recall that the skills, products, and exchanges of culturally different people are themselves the raw material of a future heritage. We know that biological diversity and a healthy biosphere depend on interacting healthy and genetically different living materials. The same principle works with cultural heritage; diversity promotes more diversity. The survival of a richly textured national heritage requires the constant production and celebration of cultural differences because they create the complex fabric of ideas, skills, and traditions that help fashion future cultures as well as contribute to our common nationhood.

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